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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

"-----"

Another winter month has almost come to a close; and naturally, the new month will start off with another major snowstorm here in the Northeast. I was just getting used to the idea of actually seeing a little bit of our lawn recently! Guess that pending foot or more of snow will dash that little bit of joy.

Have you been paying attention to the national, and likely similar, local news lately? Just gotta love that "bipartisan" political scene! Here, it's nice to know that we're back in the land of "Tax-achusetts". Yep, people are losing their jobs like a rampant wildfire, so let's raise the tolls, increase the gas tax, and push for other "revenue-enhancing" methods to stick it to the taxpayers who are already burdened trying to make ends meet week after month. Y'know who is hiring like crazy these days here? The unemployment office! No kidding!

Our new son is adapting well to his new environment, and a real life for a change. Sure, it's going to take some time and work to help him "fit" into his new surroundings and routines, but that will come. It's fun to have a new "kid" to help grow up. We still miss our oldest, but we're getting by.

So, while we're gearing up for this next weather system, let's move along and into the rest of this week's issue!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and the situation in the NewsGroup has gotten a bit better. There are a good number of messages, and I think we can pull together a full column.

I'd also like to talk a little bit about politics and economics and all the opinions that are flying around right now. I know, I know. I can

hear your heavy sigh from here. But just give me a few minutes and in return I'll try to give you something to think about.

Some people are up in arms about letting the tax breaks for the rich expire and going back to the old rate. They say that continuing the tax breaks on those making \$250,000 a year is a bad idea because most of these people are small business owners and their businesses, and they're the ones that hire people.

If, they continue, you tax these people and businesses at this unreasonable level, they won't be able to hire new employees and the economy will stagnate.

Okay, if THAT will make the economy stagnate, explain our current situation. The way I see it (since I've worked for small companies all my life and am quite well acquainted with how they function), employers don't hire new employees simply because they can afford to. As a matter of fact, they only hire employees when they NEED to.

Get the job orders rolling in and they'll hire people... trust me. Making more money available to small business owners is kind of like putting the cart before the horse. It's been my experience that, if you give a small business owner more money just by giving him more money, he'll pocket it and continue to complain about how bad things are. Sure, he might have to go two years between buying new Escalades instead of every year, but it very probably won't do a damned thing for the company... or for the economy because the money is staying in their pockets or with the Caddy dealer, and that's not where the money would do the most good. Spread that money out a bit to the folks doing the work.. do it through tax reductions to THEM.

Sure, there are small businesses (the corner bodega and the mom-and-pop video store, for instance) that are scratching to get by and would very probably put that 'found money' into their business, but the majority of the money from the current tax breaks stays in the pockets of the people who get it.

So let's think for a minute about when a small business hires new employees. When they have work that needs to be done, right? Not when they have extra money and less work. That's no stimulus at all. For decades, small businesses have been taking out... wait for it... small business loans. When they need to purchase machinery, when they need to add on to their facility, when they need to modernize, and yes, even when they need to bring on more employees. Now THAT would stimulate the banking industry... thousands of small businesses taking out small business loans and paying the money back with a little bit of interest. THERE'S a stimulus.

And here's another little tidbit. How many small business owners do you know that actually pay their own taxes? Anyone who owns a business who's worth their salt has the company own everything. That way, they can take a small little salary and bill everything to the company. If a small business owner makes a small salary, he's paying small taxes anyway. He's 'working' the system. And there's nothing wrong with that in and of itself. What's wrong is that now they're looking to pay even LESS.

One of the other things that annoys me is when conservatives (yes, let's stop beating around the bush. I'm a liberal and conservatives drive me nuts) say "Yeah, but they're gonna <fill in the blank>". If they're so damned clairvoyant, why didn't they stop this damned tidal wave of a

recession before it got started instead of rubber-stamping every spending bill that their little club put forth while they had the Presidency for eight years AND both houses of congress for twelve?

Oh, and by the way; allowing the tax incentives on the rich to expire will STILL leave them better off than they were under Ronald Reagan. Heh heh, can't you just see the skies opening up and hear the angelic choir sing every time Ronnie's name is mentioned? [chuckle]

The fact is that, while complaining that "Government isn't the solution to the problem, government IS the problem!", Reagan [angelic choir] was campaigning to be the head of the very problem he was railing against. How's THAT for logic? And while he kept telling you that your taxes were too high, he raised them four times on you. He grew the federal government at a rate unseen since Roosevelt and ballooned the national debt. And in the face of the higher taxes, greater spending, rising debt, rising cost of living, flat wages and falling disposable income, he told us all not to worry about it. All while, telling us that debt was bad and lower taxes were good. Trickle-Down economics didn't work, and we saw that even as we were racking up debt both as a nation and as individuals. Say what you want about Ronald Reagan [angelic choir], he really WAS the Teflon President.

George H.W. Bush wasn't quite as good as Reagan [angelic choir] when it came to this kind of thing. Reagan [angelic choir] never really got himself pinned down... he never let facts get in the way. George, on the other hand, aside from being remembered as Dubya's father, will probably be remembered best for his "Read... my... lips. No... new... taxes!"... and then implementing what he liked to call 'revenue enhancements'. If Reagan [angelic choir] was the Teflon President, George H.W. Bush was the Velcro President.

It took a liberal, Bill Clinton, to staunch the flow and stop the bleeding and point us back toward the surface where we had a chance at keeping our head above water. It took Clinton to end the recession that George had steadfastly denied for so long and bring about the longest-duration prosperity this country has ever seen.

That's all gone now, and we're in debt like none of us had ever imagined could be possible. What must come next is straight out of the FDR primer from the Great Depression. We've got to spend. We've got to get people to spend. And the people who can make the biggest difference... be the most effective at it and the biggest recipients of it are the middle class. Every stimulus and incentive in our history that was aimed at the more affluent has failed. Giving rich people more money doesn't stimulate the economy because they just pocket it... they're already spending what they want to spend anyway. That's kind of the definition of being rich.

Oh, there are also a couple of things I'd like to point out to my conservative friends and some of the national personalities I've heard talking trash lately...

First of all, Congressman Austria, FDR did not cause the Great Depression. The depression began in 1929. Roosevelt didn't take office until 1933.

Second. To Rush Limbaugh, who said, "See? The liberals are up to their old tricks... they released the Stimulus bill, but put it out as a PDF and, everyone knows, you can't search a PDF document!" Rush, go find a

5th grader who can show you how to do it.

Next, Congressman Boehner (aka Boner), If you spent more time looking at the Stimulus package and less time in the tanning booth or having bronzer applied, you might actually understand how spending billions of dollars on our transportation and electrical infrastructure would be a benefit.

And lastly, to all the republican congressmen and congresswomen who voted against the stimulus package, why don't you travel back to your districts and explain to your constituents that, even though you voted against the package, they would still be eligible for the benefits of it... oh, and those of you who are guilty of it can also mention that you slipped your own little piece of pork barrel spending into the bill just before you voted against it. But keep telling your voters that you voted against it. They're sure to be proud.

Okay, before we get to the UseNet messages, let me just try something....

Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan!
[angelic choir] [angelic choir] [angelic choir]

Heh heh, don't ya just love it? [chuckle]

From the com.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
=====

'Phantomm' asks for info on USB projects for the ST and Falcon:

"Where can I find technical info for a beginner who wants to do some USB projects for the Atari ST-Falcon?

A easy step by step USB project would be good for him to start with. One that doesn't require coding from scratch. Or requires no software at all. To get him started. Then he may learn enough to move on to more advanced projects of his own making.

He would be interested in some sort of USB connector for the Falcon. And if it would work on earlier Ataris then all the better. Maybe using the cartridge port, or parallel port. How about the DSP port? Could the enhanced Joystick ports be used for a USB Connector?"

'PPera' tells Phantom:

"USB is definitely not for beginners. And really, not for old Atari machines. I'm not saying that it is not possible, actually some things are already done. We have NET-USB adapter already made. Docs are available, as it went to open source project. What was the problem ? Lack of SW, drivers. So far, only mouse driver is made, and even it is not real USB, but PS2 mouse driver, as USB mouses usually use PS2 protocol.

Some notes: cartridge port is acceptable (NET-USB uses it). Joystick port is not good. Parallel port may serve, but is slow. Best would be DMA or direct ot CPU bus."

Phantom now asks about VME adaptors for the MegaSTE and TT030:

"Are there any known VME Bus adapters that will work on the Atari MSTE/TT that will allow more than one VME card to be used/connected at the same time?

Also, has anyone tried using any other cards besides the Graphics Card with the VME Bus version of the NOVA Graphics Card on a MSTE or TT?"

Michael Schwingen tells Phantom:

"Yes - I remember this has been done by simply connecting a second VME connector in parallel. Keep the connections as short as possible, and set both cards to different address & interrupt settings. For cards which require a big amount of memory space (like a graphics card), finding enough address space may be difficult in a MSTE, though."

Phantom replies:

"Ok...not sure I quite understand how to do this... I've not done a lot of VME stuff on Atari. However, today I installed a NOVA Graphics Card into the VME Bus of my 4meg, TOS 2.06, MegaSTE which also has a Vortex 386SX installed.

For the moment, I have it connected to a MAG 17inch SVGA. I'm quite surprised at how Fast it is, even though I'm not running NVDI or Warp 9 yet! Looking at pictures in a 24Bit color mode is really nice on the ole MSTE!!

Michael, when you say "connecting a second VME connector in parallel" are you talking about the Factory Connection inside the MSTE/TT? Or do you mean something like a board with a long connection that a card plugs into with 2 additional 34 pin connectors?

I have a couple of boards with the long connectors that a card such as a graphics card plugs into. Each board also has a pair of connectors with 34 pins for Ribbon Cables?

I was wondering if I could somehow use the above board along with the Nova setup so that I can add another type of card?

If so, is there any type of Ethernet or other cards that are supported with drivers that I could use on such a setup for use with a Cable Modem for Fast Internet access with the MSTE?

If not, and I can use the board, what other cards are available or were made other than graphics cards?"

Michael comes back and tells Phantom:

"It does not matter *how* you connect the second connector, as long as you keep the connections short (a few cm max)."

'Sniperstorm' asks about replacing the floppy drive in his MegaST:

"I am tying to find the parts for a floppy drive or a working or non working floppy. I have a Mega St and need the face from a drive so that it fits in my mega correctly. Anyone have those parts? I need the face button and led from the drive."

Edward Baiz asks Sniperstorm:

"Did you try Best Electronics? When I needed parts, they had them."

Snipe tells Edward:

"Update. I called best and ordered the parts I needed! Thanks!"

On the subject of image conversion, 'Atarinut' asks:

"What software do I need to convert jpg and gif to img for use as backgrounds in Jinnee205?"

Edward Baiz tells Atarinut:

"ImageCopy will do it and I think Smurf & PhotoLine are others that will work."

Mark Duckworth adds:

"I use smurf. It's free GPL now."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - PlayStation 3 Price Drop Finally?

Puppy Love - At Your Fingertips!
Atari Cartridges: The Hidden Stash?
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

PlayStation 3 Price Drop Finally in the Offing?

Remember that \$100 PlayStation 3 price drop you've been hearing about for a year or more? The one that keeps not happening? Well it's about to, according to Mike Hickey with investment firm Janco Partners, with Sony set to announce something "in the next couple days."

"Recent channel checks indicate increased speculation for a PS3 price cut announcement from Sony," said Hickey, adding that he believes the cut needs to be \$100 to catalyze PS3 sales at retail and that the market's expecting a cut "in April or by June at the latest."

Assuming Hickey's right, would anyone be surprised? Sony knows the PS3's priced out of the market, and has been for awhile. The company's long since realized brand loyalty's worthless beyond a certain sticker threshold - especially in a stagnating economy. And the heady days of king-making exclusives via franchises like Grand Theft Auto are over as spiraling production costs drive publishers to agnostically view remunerative potential. For majors like Fallout 3 and Final Fantasy XIII and Resident Evil 5, there's no such thing as the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3, just a monolithic hypothetical purchase base, like selling the same DVDs to customers with Samsung or Panasonic players. Exceptions made for DLC exclusives - and props to Microsoft for getting out ahead of that one - but the underlying publisher bean counting that's led to a preponderantly "multi-platform generation" is incontestable.

Hickey mentions "talk" of a PS3 without Blu-ray. While that's intriguing, given the number of instantly incompatible Blu-ray game titles, I'd call it noise. I can't see how splintering the market by spawning a brand new one this late in the game is going to make the PS3 any more salable. Maybe if Sony dropped the price to \$200 and offered an external Blu-ray upgrade option for \$100, but you wouldn't catch me betting on that approach by tenths.

In any event, the writing's on the wall, and was well before Janco weighed in. The PS3's getting a price cut, and it'll be here before 2009's midpoint.

Question is, if you had \$300 to burn and intent to buy a game system, would a \$100 cut tip your hand in Sony's direction?

Puppy Love - At Your Fingertips

Sit, boy, and roll over - all with the click of your thumb.

Dogs have not only had star billing in Hollywood recently due to string of canine movies like "Hotel for Dogs," Marley and Me," and "Beverly Hills Chihuahua," but are also becoming more prevalent in videogames with a list of new doggy games.

Ubisoft has worked with dog behavior specialist Cesar Millan, host of National Geographic Channel's "The Dog Whisperer," on a new PC and Nintendo DS videogame that Millan hopes will launch an interactive

franchise.

"I feel that we started with something very general like fear, separation anxiety, hyperactivity and obsession/fixation with this first game, but I would like to move into advanced games down the line once people understand more about animal behavior," said Millan.

"The Dog Whisperer" game features 40 'mild' cases that educate humans about training and understanding dogs.

One of the main points in the game is that animals recognize when someone is tense, angry or fearful, so it's important to remain calm and assertive.

Players take on the role of Millan's apprentice as they work through these virtual variations of real-life cases from the first three seasons of the hit TV series.

"Since I'm not there physically, games allow me to virtually help people around the world with their dogs," said Millan, who has watched his kids play videogames.

In fact, it was Nintendo game developer Shigeru Miyamoto's "Nintendogs" virtual puppy simulation for Nintendo DS a few years back that prompted Millan to enter the virtual world.

"My kids showed me "Nintendogs" and that's when I decided that videogames were something I wanted to get involved with," said Millan.

"That game was responsible and realistic. You don't get the coddling or the experience you'd get with a real dog, but you got the conditioning."

Miyamoto credits his "Nintendogs" creation to his own puppy.

That game, which remains a bestseller for Nintendo DS, allows gamers to choose a virtual breed that behaves like a real puppy.

Gameplay includes responsibilities like feeding, walking and nurturing the puppy, as well as teaching the dog new tricks.

Disney Interactive Studios' "Bolt" game, which is available for all consoles, allows gamers to play as the superhero K9 within the fictional TV universe from the recent movie.

That means this virtual dog has laser vision, a sonic bark and a ground pound attack to take out enemies.

Ubisoft's Wii game, "Petz Sports," lets gamers adopt a dog from 18 different breeds then train their virtual pets to compete in races and perform tricks like jumping rope and playing catch.

This June, Ubisoft plays dress up with "Petz: Fashion Dogz and Catz" for Nintendo DS.

Nintendo's upcoming Wii game, "Wii Sports Resort," will take advantage of some extra precision coming for its motion-sensor controllers with the mini-game "Disc Catch," which allows players to toss a Frisbee to their virtual pet.

When Sony Online Entertainment (SOE) releases its new free-to-play

family-friendly massively multiplayer online (MMO) game, "Free Realms," this summer, one of the main components within the game is caring for a virtual dog.

"Videogames are part of the social world kids live in today," said Millan. "But I believe the right videogames can stimulate learning and creativity when balanced with Mother Nature."

Award-Winning Franchise Extends Exclusively to PlayStation3 With the Highly Anticipated Debut of Killzone2

Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. (SCEA) announced Friday the North American launch of Killzone2 exclusively for the PlayStation3 (PS3) computer entertainment system. Developed by Guerrilla Games, the acclaimed development team that produced Killzone for PlayStation2 and Killzone: Liberation for PSP (PlayStation Portable), Killzone 2 brings players back to the hostile fight between the ISA and Helghast army. Delivering a premier first-person shooter experience, Killzone 2 brings moments of tension and anxiety through fierce enemy battles along with some of the most advanced cinematic graphics available on the PS3 platform.

Recipient of six "Editor's Choice Awards" including IGN, GamePro, and GameSpy, Killzone 2 is a post-modern futuristic military conflict inspired by 20th century warfare, submerging players in a world of chilling armed sieges and full-scale war against the evil Helghast army. Killzone 2 perfectly captures the intensity and mayhem of war as players assume the role of Sev, a hard-hitting member of the special forces unit known as the Legion, where they will find themselves on the dangerous Helghast homeland planet of Helghan.

"Since the first game play demonstration shown at E3 2007, Killzone 2 has remained one of the most anticipated title launches for 2009," said Scott A. Steinberg, Vice President, Product Marketing, SCEA. "This immersive cinematic experience, coupled with studio-grade sound and top-notch visual effects, sets a new bar for first-person shooters and provides an unmatched gaming experience that can only be produced on PS3."

With the battle of Vekta still fresh in memory, the ISA troops must traverse the hostile planet of Helghan on a mission to secure capital city, defeat the formidable Helghast troops, and capture the menacing Helghast leader, Emperor Visari. Players will be immediately thrown into battle, experiencing a visceral combat experience with intense gameplay moments that will provide hours of challenging extensive single-player and multiplayer game play action.

The sheer amount of detail in Killzone 2 is an achievement that only Blu-ray Disc technology can provide, as the game would take up to three DVD discs to hold the same amount of content. Killzone 2 also boasts technological advantages such as the use of EDGE tools, a machine proprietorship developed by Guerrilla Games, which gives the game its striking character animation, flawless visuals, life-like environments, and seamless cut scenes. In the game, the Helghan world is stunningly lit with specular lighting, particle effects, and deferred rendering technology that truly brings to life the chilling post-modern, war-ridden world. Complete with studio-scale effects, including 7.1 surround sound audio that rivals Hollywood's biggest blockbuster films, fully destructible environments, and cutting-edge artificial

intelligence, Killzone 2 delivers the ultimate next generation game play experience.

In addition to the addicting single-player action, Killzone 2 offers a robust online multiplayer mode that brings the graphical quality of single-player with a wide variety of gameplay options. "Warzone" will cycle through five different mission objectives and game modes to keep players on their toes. Online battles allow up to 32 players to engage in competitive combat, featuring a unique customizable badge system that lets opponents combine abilities from six available player classes. Clan creation will also take a new step by allowing player clans to wager Valor points with the winner taking all and utilizing points as currency within the online universe. Players can create tournaments and clans, keep tabs on stats and overall rankings, and view replays of key battles through integration with the official Killzone.com website.

The independent Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates Killzone 2 "M" for "Mature" (Descriptors: Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language).

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!

Atari Cartridges In Deep Caves - The Hidden Stash

Q&A: Atari Cartridges In Deep Caves - The Hidden Stash [In an offbeat interview, Gamasutra mines the mindset of O'Shea, Limited, which stashed 3 million sealed Atari cartridges in a cave back in 1990, and has been selling them ever since.]

A Missouri limestone cave is hardly the place you'd expect to find a towering tribute to the excesses of the Atari era, but that's exactly what a liquidation company created there years ago.

When Atari ditched its stockpiles of unsold games in the early 1990s, O Shea Ltd. was there to buy up some three million brand-new copies of Joust, Galaga, Tower Toppler, Pole Position, Ms. Pac-Man, and other common titles for the Atari 2600 and 7800.

O Shea chose an uncommon place to store them: 150 feet underground, in a warehouse built from the unused space of a limestone mine.

In the 20,000 square of storage space leased by O Shea, stacks of sealed Atari games stand in testament to Atari's past dominance of the video game market, and every title there is available for sale to the public (along with a few Jaguar games) through O Shea's website.

In an interview, O Shea president Bill Houlehan (right) revealed just how the market for mint Atari games is doing today:

How did you come to buy these games in the first place? How did you find out that Atari was liquidating them?

We've been in the closeout business for many years and we were notified by Atari that they were selling everything off.

What really inspired you to grab all of the games? Was there heavy bidding for the unsold games?

In our business it is important that if you have an opportunity to purchase an entire inventory instead of just part of it, you purchase all of it. Otherwise you run the risk of having another company purchase the remaining inventory. Yes, there was heavy bidding for the games.

What year did you buy all of these games? What was the market for Atari games like in the early 1990s? Had Atari 2600 collecting really taken off at that point?

We bought the inventory in 1990, and we had a great deal of business from overseas. We were selling container-loads of games to a company called Intertoys based out of Holland. At the time we purchased the inventory, Atari collecting had not taken off. That really happened in the last few years.

What games are the best sellers? Why do you think they're popular?

Pole Position, Ms. Pac Man, and Dig Dug are our three best sellers, followed by Battlezone, Galaxian, and Hat Trick. I think these are the most popular because they are the video game classics.

So many of our customers say how they feel like a kid again when they get these games. Atari started the video game industry and they built themselves on games like Pole Position and Ms. Pac Man.

Do you find that most of the people who buy your games are simply going to open them and play them, or do you get a lot of business from collectors who want their sealed copies to stay that way?

We have numerous buyers who buy two of each game so that they can play one set of the games, and then they can put the other set of games aside as a collectible set.

Do you see the demand for Atari 2600 games increasing in the years to come, or do you think that nostalgia-driven collecting has already peaked in the generation that grew up with the system?

The generation that grew up with these games have children now and with the new Atari movie coming out with Leonardo DiCaprio, it is bringing back childhood memories around the Atari console.

Their kids have the Wii, but they were the generation of the original video gamers and many customers want to bring back a piece of their childhood with these games and also show their children what they grew up on.

You've been selling these games for some time now. You started with three million, correct? How many games are left? How many do you sell a year?

Yes, we purchased Atari's entire inventory of just over three million games and we have about one million left.

There is usually a very steady flow of purchases for the games, but since

the announcement about the movie Atari, we have noticed a drastic spike in sales over the past few months.

How do you decide to raise the price on these games? I see that you've gone from \$2 to \$5 per game in the past few years.

The cost to store and maintain the games has considerably increased since we first purchased the inventory in the early 90's, and it got to a point where we had to increase the price a few years ago to maintain a reasonable profit.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Google Backs Europe Case Against Microsoft Browser

Google Inc. is joining forces with European regulators in an attack on Microsoft Corp.'s dominance of the Web browser market, injecting more bad blood between two of computing's richest and most powerful companies.

The latest assault on Microsoft's Internet Explorer, announced Tuesday, comes as Google is trying to expand the usage of its own Web browser, a 6-month-old product called Chrome.

A complaint by another Internet Explorer rival, Opera, prompted the European Commission to open an investigation into whether Microsoft's bundling of its Web browser with the Windows operating system had stifled competition and innovation. In their preliminary findings, the European regulators concluded that Microsoft had indeed given its Web browser an unfair advantage that has been in violation of European law since 1996.

Microsoft has until late March to respond, which could force the Redmond, Wash.-based software maker to detach Internet Explorer from Windows.

By becoming a third party in the European proceedings, Google hopes to build a case as to why Microsoft should be required to level the playing field for Chrome and other competing browsers.

"Creating a remedy that helps solve one problem without creating other unintended consequences isn't easy; but the more voices there are in the conversation the greater the chances of success," Sundar Pichai, a Google vice president, wrote in a blog post Tuesday.

The makers of Firefox, which has risen in popularity in recent years and is the second-most-used browser behind Internet Explorer, already have offered to help the European Commission crack down on Microsoft.

A Microsoft spokesman declined comment Tuesday, referring instead to a

statement that the company issued last month after the European Commission's preliminary findings.

"We are committed to conducting our business in full compliance with European law," Microsoft said at that time.

In a quarterly report to shareholders last month, Microsoft said European regulators might force the company to set up a version of Windows that would bundle several browsers with the operating system, to make it easier for users to pick something other than Internet Explorer.

While Microsoft's has been at odds with other browser makers, its rivalry with Google is the most prickly.

Google has milked its leadership of the lucrative Internet search market to undermine Microsoft's influence on how people interact with their computers. Microsoft has unsuccessfully tried to thwart Google's growth by pouring billions of dollars into its own search engine.

The battle between the two foes has occasionally spilled into the regulatory arena. Last year, Microsoft spearheaded a campaign that raised serious antitrust concerns about Google's plans to sell some ads on behalf of Yahoo Inc., which is a distant second in the Internet search market.

Google scrapped the Yahoo alliance in November, averting a lawsuit that U.S. Justice Department planned to file to block the partnership.

Apple Says Steve Jobs Is Still Involved

Apple Inc Chief Executive Steve Jobs remains deeply involved in company decisions despite ceding control over operations, executives told shareholders, while waving off questions about reports of a regulatory probe into disclosure.

In a one-hour annual meeting at the firm's headquarters in Cupertino, California, executives cautiously adhered to previous statements while fielding questions about Jobs' health - a subject of persistent market speculation.

But they declined to answer questions about reports that the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission was examining Apple's conduct in disclosing Jobs' health problems, which will keep the widely respected executive sidelined till at least June.

Facing a prolonged recession and drought in consumer spending, Apple has been unable to shake questions regarding the future of its charismatic CEO, who has been on medical leave and out of public view for more than a month.

Jobs - who co-founded Apple and is credited with transforming it into a consumer juggernaut after returning as CEO a decade ago - announced in January that he would take a five-month leave of absence, handing over the reins of the firm and saying his health problems were "more complex" than originally thought.

"Nothing has changed" since that announcement, co-lead director Arthur

Levinson said in response to shareholders' questions at the firm's headquarters in Cupertino, California.

Legal experts say Apple could face lawsuits over its health-related disclosures - or lack thereof - although that part of the law is seen as something of a gray area.

Still, the mood at Wednesday's annual meeting was casual. Shareholders joined in a "Happy Birthday" chorus for Jobs, who was absent but turned 54 on Tuesday.

In 2004, Jobs was treated for a rare type of pancreatic cancer. He appeared gaunt at an Apple event in June 2008, touching off speculation that his cancer had returned. The company has not managed to completely quash that speculation.

The global economic slowdown has crushed consumer spending, and Apple's array of pricey Macintosh computers, iPhones and iPods is starting to feel the pinch. Analysts say the company needs to launch a new blockbuster product this year to help galvanize growth.

Yahoo Signals It's Open To a Microsoft Search Deal

The Microsoft-Yahoo drama isn't over yet. There's a possible deal to be done in the form of Yahoo outsourcing or selling its search business to Microsoft.

At the Goldman Sachs Technology and Internet Conference in San Francisco on Wednesday, Yahoo CFO Blake Jorgensen gave the audience reason to believe the search company is still open to negotiation.

"Key to any deal we might do would be full access to the data for intent," Jorgensen said. "We're not opposed to doing a deal that would maximize the business one way or the other, be it a partnership or a sale."

On Thursday, a Yahoo filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission revealed that Jorgensen is leaving the company. Yahoo said it has begun a search for a new chief financial officer.

Yahoo execs aren't the only ones leaving the door open. Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer on Tuesday indicated that his company is open to discussions about a search deal. Microsoft views Yahoo's search assets as a way to accelerate its position in the marketplace and better compete with Google.

But Yahoo does have some concerns. "It is extremely difficult to draw a line down the middle of the organization and split it into two pieces," Jorgensen told the conference. He referred to the impact of extracting Yahoo's search business from the rest of its assets, which include a strong display-advertising business on a wide network of high-traffic consumer sites.

Yahoo has been pushing forward with search innovations. Earlier this month, Yahoo launched a rich-media offering that plays video in search results. And on Tuesday the company rolled out three new targeting products - Search Retargeting, Enhanced Retargeting, and Enhanced Targeting - for brand and performance marketers to help them reach the

online audiences that matter most.

Search Retargeting is a customized display targeting solution that lets advertisers capture user interest from search terms and retarget the user with display ads throughout the Yahoo Network. For example, if a user searches for the keyword "sandals," indicating strong purchase intent, an advertiser can target that user with a tailored display ad for footwear.

"The key piece of all of this in my mind is the notion that Yahoo would still get access to the search-query data that would then enable them to target display ads," said Greg Sterling, principal analyst at Sterling Market Intelligence.

The Search Retargeting product is a potentially effective offering, Sterling said, but if Yahoo outsources search and doesn't have access to the search-query data, it would undermine this new approach. As Sterling sees it, Jorgensen's statement about "full access to data" suggests that if Yahoo can get the kind of information it needs from Microsoft, a deal might be possible.

"All things being equal, Yahoo probably doesn't want to give up this piece of its business. Yahoo is adding new tools and capabilities on a weekly basis," Sterling said. "If the economy wasn't so bad and if Yahoo wasn't struggling, they probably wouldn't even consider it. Longer-term, search is an important asset to have - and not just online but also in the mobile environment as well. Mobile search is a significant potential business for Yahoo."

Where's My E-Mail? Google's Gmail Goes Down for Hours

Google and its e-mail users had a rude awakening Tuesday morning, with Gmail suffering a major outage between about 1 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. EST. The BBC reported the service returned for many users after about four hours, which would make it one of the longest e-mail outages for the search giant.

Although it occurred in the middle of the night, an outage of that length is significant because Gmail's users are estimated at about 113 million. This makes it the third most popular e-mail service in the world, behind Hotmail's 280 million users and Yahoo's 274 million.

Google Apps, a suite of business applications that includes Gmail, is used by more than a million businesses worldwide. One of those businesses is Google itself, which was unable to reply via e-mail to journalists during the outage.

The service agreement for businesses specifies that Gmail and Google's other services will be 99.9 percent operational each month. If the uptime is lower than 99.9 percent, paying customers may be eligible for a refund.

On The Official Google Blog, Gmail Site Reliability Manager Acacio Cruz posted a notice at 4:28 a.m. acknowledging the company had "some problems." Later he wrote, "our monitoring systems alerted us that Gmail consumer and businesses accounts worldwide could not get access to their e-mail."

He apologized for the inconvenience, and noted that, at the time of the posting, users in the U.S. and U.K. who "have enabled Gmail offline through Gmail Labs should be able to access their inbox, although they won't be able to send or receive emails."

A posting on the Google Apps support site also noted the problem and offered an apology. "The problem," the notice said, "is now resolved and users have had access restored." The company takes "issues like this very seriously," the notice said.

In general, Google's reputation for reliability for Gmail is high. The company said it only had an average of 10 to 15 minutes of downtime last year, with the biggest one being an outage of several hours in August.

Laura DiDio, an analyst with Information Technology Intelligence Corps, said both consumer and business users of Gmail will "feel the pain during an outage like this." But, she added, that pain will dissipate until the next time.

"And, if you're Google," she said, "you of course need to make sure there aren't too many more 'next times.'"

If it's chronic and regular, DiDio noted, it could have an impact on the acceptance of Gmail and Google Apps among consumers and businesses, particularly since both have a variety of aggressive competitors.

UK Rules Out Charges Against Pentagon Hacker

British prosecutors said on Thursday they would not bring charges against a computer expert accused by a U.S. attorney of the "biggest military hack of all time," dealing a blow to his bid to avoid extradition.

Gary McKinnon was arrested by British police in 2002 after U.S. prosecutors charged him with illegally accessing computers, including the Pentagon, U.S. army, navy and NASA systems, and causing \$700,000 worth of damage.

A British court ruled in 2006 that he should be extradited to the United States to face trial. If convicted by a U.S. court, he could face up to 70 years in prison. McKinnon has been battling the British court decision ever since.

His lawyers asked Britain's Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to consider a request to prosecute him in Britain where they believe he would receive a much shorter sentence.

But the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) said a review had concluded it would be wrong for him to face trial at home.

"These were not random experiments in computer hacking, but a deliberate effort to breach U.S. defense systems at a critical time which caused well documented damage," said Alison Saunders, head of the CPS Organized Crime Division.

"They may have been conducted from Mr. McKinnon's home computer -- and in that sense there is a UK link - but the target and the damage were transatlantic."

McKinnon is accused of causing the entire U.S. Army's Military District of Washington network of more than 2,000 computers to be shut down for 24 hours.

He has told Reuters he was just a computer nerd who wanted to find out whether aliens really existed and became obsessed with trawling large military networks for proof.

At the time of his indictment, Paul McNulty, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, said: "Mr. McKinnon is charged with the biggest military computer hack of all time."

The CPS decision does not spell the end of McKinnon's legal battle. Last month, London's High Court ruled McKinnon, who has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, could seek a judicial review of the government's decision to extradite him.

His lawyers argue his health would suffer and he would be at real risk of suicide if he was handed over to U.S. authorities.

"Mr. McKinnon will still remain in the United Kingdom as the judicial review proceedings against the (U.K.) Secretary of State remain outstanding and we are hopeful that those proceedings will be successful," his lawyer Kaim Todner said in a statement.

Apple Debuts Safari 4 Beta for Mac and Windows

The browser wars are starting again. Apple on Tuesday launched the public beta of Safari 4. The maker of the Mac is billing its latest browser version as the world's fastest and most innovative for both Mac and Windows PCs. Analysts said Apple is right to brag about its latest innovations.

The Safari 4 beta comes with a slew of new features that aim to make browsing more intuitive and enjoyable. Top Sites, for example, offers a visual preview of frequently visited pages. Full History Search lets you search through titles, Web addresses and the complete text of recently viewed pages. And Cover Flow lets you flip through Web history or bookmarks much the same way you flip through your album covers on the iPod.

"Apple created Safari to bring innovation, speed and open standards back into Web browsers, and today it takes another big step forward," said Philip Schiller, Apple's senior vice president of worldwide product marketing. "Safari 4 is the fastest and most efficient browser for Mac and Windows, with great integration of HTML 5 and CSS 3 Web standards that enables the next generation of interactive Web applications."

According to Apple, the Nitro JavaScript engine in Safari 4 is the world's most advanced browser technology. The claims are impressive. Apple said Nitro runs JavaScript 4.2 times faster than Safari 3, up to 30 times faster than Internet Explorer 7, and more than three times faster than Firefox 3. Apple also said Safari loads HTML Web pages three times faster than IE 7 and almost three times faster than Firefox 3.

"It's hard to innovate on the browsing experience these days. It's simple. It's familiar. It works. But Apple really has done some nice

stuff with the Safari 4 beta," said Michael Gartenberg, vice president of strategy and analysis at Interpret. "I have only been using it for a few minutes, but it definitely feels like there's a speed bump here."

Beyond the speed, Apple has also integrated nine new key features in Safari 4. Tabs on Top aims to offer better tabbed browsing with drag-and-drop tab management tools and an intuitive button for opening new ones. The Smart Address Field automatically completes Web addresses by displaying an easy-to-read list of suggestions from Top Sites, bookmarks and browsing history. And Smart Search Field lets users fine-tune searches with recommendations from Google Suggest or a list of recent searches.

What's more, Full Page Zoom offers a closer look at any Web site without degrading the quality of the site's layout and text. Built-in Web developer tools debug, tweak and optimize a Web site for peak performance and compatibility. A new Windows-native look in Safari for Windows uses standard Windows font rendering and native title bar, borders and toolbars so Safari fits the look and feel of other Windows XP and Windows Vista applications.

As Gartenberg sees it, Apple is indicating it is serious about the Web and taking the experience to the next level. Safari 4 includes HTML 5 support for offline technologies so Web-based applications can store information locally without an Internet connection, and is the first browser to support advanced CSS Effects that enable Web graphics using reflections, gradients and precision masks.

"What we have here is a whole new era of browser wars going on with Microsoft, Apple, Mozilla and Google battling it out. The stakes may be different, but they are no less important than they were in the last century," Gartenberg said. "Safari 4 cements the Safari position on Mac OS. Mac OS users have a first-class integrated browsing experience and don't have to look elsewhere. But it also drives the technology further onto the Windows platform."

Microsoft: Laid-off Can Keep Extra Pay After All

A few weeks after launching the first wide-scale layoffs in its history, Microsoft Corp. admits it screwed up a key part of the plan.

First Microsoft realized that an administrative glitch caused it to pay more severance than intended to some laid-off employees. The company's response: It asked the ex-workers for the money back.

But when one of Microsoft's letters seeking repayment surfaced on the Web on Saturday, the situation turned embarrassing. On Monday, the company reversed course and said the laid-off workers could keep the extra payouts.

Lisa Brummel, Microsoft's senior vice president for human resources, said the letters were mailed to 25 of the 1,400 people let go in January. Most of the checks were off by about \$4,000 to \$5,000, she said.

Brummel said she learned of the letters over the weekend after one appeared on the technology blog TechCrunch.

"I decided it didn't quite feel right," she said in an interview.

The executive called most of the 25 laid-off employees Monday to personally tell them Microsoft would not seek repayment after all.

Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft also gave about 20 employees too little severance. When the company noticed its mistake, it sent checks and explanations to those people, she said.

Brummel called the glitch a clerical error, and said that at some point in the process of calculating severance packages, communicating with employees and cutting checks, "we had payments misaligned with people's names." (Brummel said she didn't know whether an Excel spreadsheet was at the root of the problem.)

With the recession biting into sales of Microsoft's core Office and Windows software, the company said in January it would let up to 5,000 of its 94,000 employees go, the only mass layoff in its 34-year history. Microsoft remains profitable, however, and has a cash hoard of nearly \$21 billion.

eBay Auction Tool Web Site Infected With Malware

A Trojan horse lurking on servers belonging to Auctiva.com, a Web site offering eBay auction tools, infected people's PCs last week.

The problem became very public when Google's malware warning system kicked in as people tried to browse the site, saying Auctiva was infected with malware.

Google will display an interstitial page warning people of certain Web sites known to contain malware.

"It appears the reason these virus alert warnings started showing up on our site is because some of our machines were injected with malware originating in China," according to a post on Auctiva's community forum. "The malware we believe to be at fault has also hit a number of other high-profile Websites over the past six months."

It appears that the malware targeted Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser. Auctiva recommended using Firefox, as that browser is "less susceptible to this sort of malware than Internet Explorer."

"Found eight Trojans on my system that seemed to have snuck through my on-access protection, or maybe because, like a fool, I clicked 'ignore the warning' to get to Auctiva's front page," wrote one user on Auctiva's forum.

If Google displays a warning about a dangerous Web site, it still gives people the option of browsing to the site. Auctiva said it was working with Google to ensure the warning is not displayed now that it has cleaned up its servers.

However, people who browsed Auctiva between Thursday and Saturday afternoon until 2 p.m. Pacific time should ensure their machines are not infected. Auctiva recommends clearing the browser cache and deleting all temporary files. Also, Windows PCs should be up to date on patches, and antivirus software should be used, Auctiva said.

Internet "Addiction" May Fuel Teen Aggression

Teenagers who are preoccupied with their Internet time may be more prone to aggressive behavior, researchers reported Monday.

In a study of more than 9,400 Taiwanese teenagers, the researchers found that those with signs of Internet "addiction" were more likely to say they had hit, shoved or threatened someone in the past year.

The link remained when the investigators accounted for several other factors - including the teenagers' scores on measures of self-esteem and depression, as well as their exposure to TV violence.

The findings, published online by the Journal of Adolescent Health, do not however prove that Internet addiction breeds violent behavior in children.

It is possible that violence-prone teenagers are more likely to obsessively use the Internet, explained lead researcher Dr. Chih-Hung Ko, of Kaohsiung Medical University in Taiwan.

However, the findings add to evidence from other studies that media - whether TV, movies or video games - can influence children's behavior. They also suggest that parents should pay close attention to their teenagers' Internet use, and the potential effects on their real-life behavior, Ko told Reuters Health.

According to Ko's team, some signs of Internet addiction include preoccupation with online activities; "withdrawal" symptoms, like moodiness and irritability, after a few Internet-free days; and skipping other activities to devote more time to online ones.

In this study, teenagers who fit the addiction profile generally were more aggression-prone than their peers. But the type of Internet activity appeared to matter as well.

Online chatting, gambling and gaming, and spending time in online forums or adult pornography sites were all linked to aggressive behavior. In contrast, teens who devoted their time to online research and studying were less likely than their peers to be violence-prone.

According to Ko, certain online activities may encourage kids to "release their anger" or otherwise be aggressive in ways they normally would not in the real world. Whether this eventually pushes them to be more aggressive in real life is not yet clear, the researcher said.

Ko recommended that parents talk to their children about their Internet use and their general attitudes toward violence.

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